Why research the media and popular culture for/as adult education? “Really useful” approaches that affect teaching and learning

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Media and popular culture have an enormous influence. There’s been some discussion of popular culture and critical media literacy (CML) related to adult learning at recent adult education conferences, such as AERC (Armstrong, 2005; Tisdell, Guy, Sandlin, Wright, & Thompson, 2008; Miller, 1999; Sandlin, 2007), and at SCUTREA (Armstrong 2007; Miller, Armstrong & Edwards, 2005; Tisdell, 2007; Wright, 2006). In addition recent journal articles and publications in the field have discussed research that explored what type of entertainment media adult educators consume and how they use it in their teaching (Tisdell & Thompson 2007; Tisdell, 2008); how adults learn, and construct further meaning about work through The Office (Armstrong, 2008); about gender from The Avengers (Wright 2007) or Buffy, the Vampire Slayer (Jarvis 2005); about identities related to race, gender, and class (Guy, 2007) or ways anti-consumption activists have turned media on its head in the form of culture jamming (Sandlin 2007). In fact, Wright and Sandlin (2009) did an excellent literature review of the research and publication that has been done in the field relating to popular culture that appeared in recently in the Adult Education Quarterly.

In light of the theme of this conference, is research on the media and popular culture in adult education “really useful” research? The answer to this question of course depends: on whose interests are served by the research; on whether or not one believes that it is important to know how adults are educated/mis-educated through the media; whether or not it is possible to draw on the media as a tool for adult education or to teach critical media literacy. As Cervero and Wilson (2005) argue, there are different stakeholders (including learners, educators, administrators, funders, and the affected public) who negotiate power and interest, which determine how educational programs are planned and delivered. This is also true in determining whether research is “really useful,” as well as whether it’s funded or published. This is not to say there are not some good “standards” and “rigors” of research, no matter what the paradigm or type of research. Nevertheless, funders often don’t see it that way, and quantitative research studies with large data sets are more often funded that focus on “outcomes”
and “evidence” than are qualitative and action research studies. The purpose of this paper, is to explore whether or not research on media and culture in adult education is “really useful” by discussing three related research studies involving the co-authors, along with an example and some implications for practice.

All of the studies were grounded in both a critical media literacy framework and the work of scholars (Buckingham 2003; Giroux 2002; Yosso 2002) who note the tendency of the media to both reproduce and resist structural power relations based on race, gender, class, and sexual orientation in their portrayals of characters, and who argue that educators should be teaching critical media literacy. To some extent these studies were also grounded in the work of those who argue that the media can act as a form of public pedagogy (Giroux 2002; Sandlin 2007). Given space limitations these studies can only be discussed briefly here; we refer the reader to some of the citations within for a more in depth discussion of some of these studies.

A Recent Survey of Media and Adult and Higher Educators
One study was a recent online survey of 104 educators teaching in higher education, (with most identifying as adult educators), which examined their consumption of media and how they use it in their teaching, with an eye toward teaching for diversity. The survey was conducted online late in 2007 through 2008. Our point in doing the study was to compare it to an earlier mixed method study that examined these issues among adult and higher educators in the USA (Tisdell & Thompson 2007). In doing the more recent survey, we were hoping to include more participants from outside of the USA through making contact with listserves (including the SCUTREA listserve) to increase representation. The total number of persons receiving the emailed message containing the link to the survey is not known, but 104 educators responded. Unfortunately only 14 participants from outside the USA, who reside in and/or hold citizenship in the UK, Northern Ireland, Austria, Canada, Australia, South Africa, India, Germany, and Turkey responded to the survey. This sub sample of 14 is really too small for statistically valid comparisons; however some tentative observations can be made.

Overall, the 14 participants from outside the USA generally watch a bit more nighttime TV than their USA colleagues, though 67% of all 104 participants watch less than 10 hours per week. Favorite programming on television coincides for both groups, with most enjoying crime dramas, news magazines, and sports or documentaries, while intensely disliking reality television. Programs watched regularly when most of the data were collected in late 2007 and in 2008 include The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, The Colbert Report, The Closer, Law & Order, Brothers and Sisters, The Office, The Tudors, and news and home improvement programs. The most memorable films are similar for both groups as well, which is not surprising given the dominance of US media production and distribution all over the
world. These films include documentaries (e.g. *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Sicko*, *March of the Penguins*), romances (e.g. *Pride and Prejudice*, *Brokeback Mountain*), dramas (e.g. *Rendition*, *Shawshank Redemption*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Crash*, *The Milagro Beanfield War*, *The Color Purple*, *Life is Beautiful*), and action films (e.g. *The Matrix*, *Gladiator*, *The Departed*).

Given that the survey attempted to examine thoughts on the media in relation to diversity issues, a number of questions examined the extent to which they deal with these issues in their teaching. Ninety percent of the respondents focus on issues of race/ethnicity, gender, class, or sexual orientation in their classes. In terms of the use of media in their teaching, the large majority of respondents reported *occasionally* utilizing visual media, in the form of movie clips, documentaries, advertisements, YouTube videos, and television clips. They use visual media in the classroom on occasion, but primarily in pieces to demonstrate a point.

Do the findings from this study qualify as really useful knowledge? At this juncture, this is largely a quantitative study featuring descriptive statistics that provide some interesting findings about higher educators’ consumption of media, and the extent they draw on media in their teaching. Nevertheless to apply the findings from the study to anything meaningful from an educational perspective, there would need to be some qualitative or action research to examine how adult educators incorporate the use and critique of popular culture and media in their practice. The next group of studies offers what we see as more useful knowledge.

**A Cross Case Analysis of Three Critical Media Literacy Studies**

Elsewhere, one of us (Tisdell, 2008), as the lead researcher has discussed a cross analysis of three studies conducted with co-researchers related to critical media literacy published or presented elsewhere, which analyzed specifically for the relevance of the findings to transformative teaching for diversity. The first was a mixed methods study of a survey of 215 USA adult educators as well as 15 qualitative interviews about their consumption of media and what they learn from it (Tisdell & Thompson, 2007); the second was a follow up qualitative study examining people’s responses to the movie *Crash* and its use for teaching for diversity. The third study was a qualitative action research study of critical media literacy teaching for diversity of fictional entertainment media (movies and television) in my own graduate class (Tisdell’s) of 18 entitled “Popular Culture as Pedagogy: Teaching for Critical Consciousness and Critical Media Literacy” that was team taught with two advanced doctoral students. The curriculum was partly negotiated with students, both in terms of assignments and in choosing which movies and television shows to view and analyze. Some of the movies chosen for analysis by the class were *Crash*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Whale Rider*, *The Hours*. Data from this study included several online conversations about movies, television shows and course readings, and three sets of student
papers—one analyzing a movie, another outlining practical project relating critical media literacy to students’ educational practice, and a final course paper.

**Findings as really useful knowledge**
The cross case analysis of findings highlight the notion of pleasure, and how it can be both a motivator as well as a deterrent to critical media literacy; the ways people finding alternative narratives about themselves and others; their expanded thinking about marginalized “others” and hegemonic processes through discussion and analysis of media and semiotics; and new insights through facilitated discussion and analysis.

We believe the findings of the cross case analysis of these three interrelated studies is research that provides “really useful knowledge.” The analysis was done partly in response to O’Sullivan’s (1999) argument that a critical pedagogy of media analysis was needed in adult transformative learning theory. There are certainly many who have discussed critical pedagogy, and critical media literacy in teaching very specifically (Buckingham 2003, Giroux 2002), as well as those already cited adult educators specifically in the field. Nevertheless, the point of that cross case analysis was to offer a critical pedagogy of media from a transformative learning theory perspective within the field. The analysis offered both theoretical as well as practical insight about how educators can draw on the media as well as the critical medial literacy literature and research to inform their own teaching to examine the way the media operates as a tool of hegemony, and ways that it can be used counter-hegemonically.

**Useful knowledge: generating use in practice**
The findings of these studies generated “really usefulness knowledge” in that one of us (Rahima Williams), as student and co-researcher developed and conducted a Critical Media Literacy activity based on the findings of the studies. Given that there has been much suspicion of Arabs, Arab Americans, and Muslims living in the USA since 9-11, the CML activity made use of the movie *The Siege*, and was developed and implemented in group with four Arab/Arab American women. This is of particular interest to me, because I am American but grew up in the Mideast.

As a way of introducing the learning activity, I (Rahima) asked participants to share some stories of how, and if, they were stereotyped by the dominant culture. This question sparked a very lively conversation about stereotypes. I then proceeded by giving the group a brief overview of Yosso’s (2002) assessment of critical media literacy, specifically the use of media “as a pedagogical tool to facilitate students’ becoming critically conscious of themselves in relation to the structure of power and domination in their world” (p. 59). This introduction was helpful in setting the tone for the activity and highlighting the lens in which this movie was to be viewed. Moreover, it could be argued that Yosso’s and Guy’s (2007) insights gave the participants a
sense of empowerment in that one woman said, “I cannot wait to watch this now,” which I interpreted as, “now that I have a new lens for interpretation, I am ready to start becoming media literate.” Immediately after viewing the movie, I introduced Shaheen’s (2001) analysis of Arabs in the media, specifically highlighting the four basic myths that pertain to the stereotypes of Arabs and Arab Americans in Hollywood films, namely, that “Arabs are all fabulously wealthy, they are barbarians and uncultured, they are sex maniacs, and they revel in acts of terrorism” (Shaheen, 2001, p. 13). I started the discussion by asking participants to identify how Arab characters are portrayed in the movie, more specifically, to compare and contrast the role of FBI agent Frank Haddad and other Arab characters in contrast to the American characters in the film, and to analyse portrayals around race, ethnicity, gender, religion. We also did an analysis of symbol in the film around clothing, dress, use of language and accent. While space doesn’t allow for discussion of detail, as a result of an overview of critical media literacy and what to look for, as well as in depth discussion as we constructed new knowledge together, these women gave a surprisingly nuanced analysis of the movie, as well as points of agreement and disagreement with Shaheen’s analysis of portrayals of Arabs in the media. Thus, they began their journey of becoming more critically media literate.

‘Sicko’ and its aftermath: a study of critical public pedagogy

The purpose of the third study, discussed in detail elsewhere (Tisdel & Sprow 2009) was to examine health care professionals’ views of the film Sicko as a tool of adult education (or mis-education, depending on their perspective) and the extent to which they believe the movie affects the national consciousness and discussion of how to reform the USA health care system. The study was grounded in the assumption that Michael Moore is a provocateur who attempts in his movie to get discussion going on an issue, by making use of the tactics of what Sandlin (2007, following Giroux) refers to as critical public pedagogy. In the film Sicko, Moore did so about the critical issue of health care. This was a qualitative study of educators and health care professionals’ perspectives of Michael Moore’s film Sicko, gleaned from two different but related data sources: (1) through focus group interviews that were transcribed with 22 health care professionals, who work in the health care industry, and/or were also seeking further degrees related to health care, or were faculty members in higher education settings; (2) textual analyses of 14 reviews of Sicko that appeared in medical or nursing journals by health care professionals. Before discussing the analysis of data sources, first we contextualize Sicko’s apparent impact based on popular media sources.

Evidence in popular media of Moore’s influence on health care

Within weeks of the release of Sicko, the Kaiser Family Foundation (2007) did some tracking on its reach and effects in getting the discussion going. They found that of those that had seen it, the response was more positive (48%) than negative (33%); further, 45% had a conversation about the health care
system as a result of seeing it, and 43% indicating that they are more likely to think that health care reform is needed because of watching the movie. Further, a year later, during the months leading to the 2008 USA presidential election found that 54% of people wanted to hear the candidates talk about healthcare and health insurance affordability, and 62% thought healthcare costs can be improved by president and Congress.

As further evidence of the film’s impact, following the release of Sicko in June of 2007, the California Nurses Association launched a national campaign encouraging citizens across the country to see Sicko and support a single-payer system of healthcare in the US, alternately known as universal healthcare or Medicare for All. Following the release of Sicko, CNN physician, Sanjay Gupta, criticized the film on air for its “facts.” In a much publicized point-by-point clarification by Moore on his website, the doctor stated that the facts were correct, given the information Moore used.

Further, of the many inaugural balls that took place on January 20, 2009 for President Obama, at the Smithsonian Institution Natural History Museum, containing the famous Hope Diamond, inaugural attendees enjoyed speeches by prominent global healthcare advocates, joined together to express their support for health as a human right. Joining the advocates onstage was Sicko patient and spokesperson for the California Nurses Association, Donna Smith, which indicates the movie’s effect on the national dialogue. Thus, the popular press indicates that Sicko was having a strong effect on the national dialogue about health care, but what about the qualitative data from our study?

Findings suggest really useful knowledge

The findings were similar between the focus group participants and the fourteen articles that appeared in medical or nursing journals articles aimed at medical professionals that constituted our data for the textual analysis. The critiques of the film and of Moore by these authors in the medical professional journals focused on two themes: the lack of complete information portrayed in the film; and the fact that Moore’s style could be conceived of as detrimental to effectively communicating his message from an unbiased perspective. Nevertheless, the authors were hopeful that the film will have a positive effect on the current situation by making people think about the issues surrounding healthcare. McLellan (2007) while quite critical of Moore, ends by saying “my country… could do with a few more irritants just like him” (p. 2152).

The discussion of the health care issue, and of Sicko continues in the USA, and Michael Moore continues to be a provocateur, who functions as a critical public pedagogue. The extent to which people talk and critique the film and think about the health care system and work to change indicates that it has indeed been a form of critical public pedagogy. Moore, and his public pedagogy on health care have indeed helped stir up adults’ consciousness in
his own version of emancipatory education. Given that this study explored how he did this, we believe that it is “really useful research”.

Conclusion
We believe the research on media is “really useful knowledge” when 1) it engages people about what they experience every day; (2) it raises people’s consciousness about the hegemonic power of the media, as well as how it can be used for counter-hegemonic purposes; (3) it enables educators to see how they can use media and popular culture in their own teaching contexts. Further, it’s “really useful” when it leads people to action. In the end, we’ll leave it to readers and conference attendees to decide if the research studies described here meet these criteria.

References


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